

Response to the Funding Councils' Review of Research Assessment From the Association of Business Schools (ABS)

The Association of Business Schools (ABS) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Review of Research Assessment.

We recognize the need to ensure that public money is well spent and that in designing the assessment process allocation of funds should be transparent and fit for purpose.

In our view the purpose of research assessment ought to be broader than the narrow focus on distributing research funds. We argue that the overriding purpose should be to develop and sustain an excellent research base that is capable of enhancing the quality of life and the UK's economic performance. This means supporting excellent research wherever it is located and developing as broad a research base as possible.

Approaches to Assessments

Four distinct approaches are suggested within Appendix 1 in the document they each have advantages and disadvantages. These are considered below.

Expert Review. In our view this approach offers the best possibility for critically examining output in terms of excellence and use. The major draw back is the costly nature of expert review. However, given the importance of the review to a broad range of stakeholders this approach provides value for money. The key consideration here is the composition of the panel. In our view academics ought not to be the sole arbiter of the quality of their output. Therefore, we recommend a broader panel consisting of experts capable of judging both the quality of output and its use.

The metrics ought to focus on research outputs. Outputs ought to be considered on merit rather than by place of publication.

Both past performance and future plans ought to be considered.

Algorithm. This approach suffers from a number of major disadvantages including adoption of a narrow approach, potential for manipulation, variability of citation across disciplines and within disciplines, disproportionate impact of some faculty and journals on metrics, and over emphasis on the past. However, this approach is less costly to deliver.

Overall, we do not support this approach as the sole method of assessment. However, we acknowledge that an element of algorithm could be used in conjunction with "Expert Review".

Self-Assessment. The process of self-assessment is useful because it encourages questioning and identification of weaknesses and strengths. It is also a process that institutions have experience of and are familiar with. Moreover, many institutions as a matter routine engage in self-assessment of research. However, the key problem with the approach is the process of verification. The verification process is likely to be at least as time consuming as the peer review process used in 2001. Furthermore, the outcome may be more open to game paying and lacking in both consistency and rigour.

Historical Rating. In our view this approach will encourage complacency, inertia and create barriers to innovation. In the long run this approach will weaken rather than strengthen the international standing of UK's research. Therefore, we do not support this approach.

Thus we conclude that, for Business and Management subjects, expert or peer review has much to commend it, though we appreciate that quantitative measures, such as the graduation rates of PhD students, might be useful supplementary data that indicate research performance. We think that the expert or peer review approach can easily be modified to introduce complementary definitions of research quality, relevance and impact and some additional measure to research productivity.

The Cross-Cutting Themes

a. What should/could an assessment of the research base be used for?

The current use of the RAE is to inform research funding decisions. As this will probably continue the question of additional use of the information is timely. It should be recognized that in business and management there is a reputational effect that drives other income generation (e.g. overseas student recruitment, MBA recruitment, business funded work etc). Research councils see only a small part of extent research and therefore have a much less complete picture than that which can be gained from a broader assessment of the research base.

b. How often should research be assessed? Should it be on a rolling basis?

The broader purpose of research assessment has a significant impact on the time lag between each cycle. In our view a six-year cycle will provide sufficient lead-time to make the type of contribution that we think research ought to make to quality of life and economic competitiveness. At the same time the longer cycle time offers greater stability. This in turn provides for better and more effective long-term planning.

c. What is excellence in research?

One of the key issues raised by the consultation paper is the definition of quality and excellence. The definition of quality is not independent of purpose. A research output that meets both a quality and applicability hurdles fits our notion of purpose. The key dimensions of quality are rigour, novelty of approach, originality of output, contribution to understanding and theory development. The key dimensions of applicability are the potential and actual adoption by user groups. However it is clear that excellence in research is difficult to define.

d. Should research assessment determine the proportion of the available funding directed towards each subject?

The proportion of available funding allocated to each unit of assessment ought to be determined well in advance and made known. Such determination ought to take into account its relative importance within higher education as a whole. Considerably more funding should be allocated to the broad business and management unit to reflect its dominant position as the most popular subject area at undergraduate and postgraduate study levels and also with overseas students together with very large numbers of research active staff. It is imperative that the funding allocation method is made clear and that promises are then adhered to.

e. Should each institution be assessed in the same way?

This is clearly dependent on the missions and direction of the Business and Management capability. Most institutions have pockets of research excellence and these all need to be recognized.

f. Should each subject or group of subjects be assessed in the same way?

It is clearly crucial that the same basic principles should apply to all subjects but mode of assessment might differ between hard and soft sciences.

The assessment ought to focus on the output of individual researchers within a cognate subject area. Abstract issues such as culture or inputs such as amount of funding should not play a key role in determining the excellence and relevance of research. We acknowledge that assessment ought to take place at cognate discipline areas. For consistency the same rules should be applied to all institutions and cognate subject areas. In our view Business and Management ought to be reviewed as a whole and therefore there should be an overall reduction in the number of units of assessment.